1: Hart & Pilling E-5 (1928-1954) 1960
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Tiwi Marriage

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Cultural Isolation

PEOPLE WHO LIVE in the congested cities and towns of the modern world have difficulty in realizing how different life can be at the hunting and gathering level of human existence. The basic fact about the life of hunters and gatherers is the thinly spread-out manner in which they live and the isolation of families and households from each other. In the case of the Tiwi, these conditions of isolation and dispersal were accentuated by their island habitat. Melville and Bathurst Islands lie off the northern coast of Australia some fifty to eighty miles from Darwin, which is the administrative capital of the empty north. They are separated from the mainland by about twenty-five miles of open sea at the narrowest part. This distance is slightly greater than the distance that separates England from France at the Straits of Dover, and just as the dim outline of coastal France can be seen from England on clear days, so the dim outline of the Australian mainland can be seen from the southern edges of the islands. However, Tiwi tradition is firm and certain that before the white man's arrival there was no contact between the islands and the mainland. To them, the dimly seen coastline of Australia was *Tibambinumi*, the home of the dead, to which all Tiwi souls went after death. It follows from this they they regarded the inhabited world as composed of their own two islands, and on those islands they lived a self-contained and exclusive existence. Occasionally outsiders appeared, either castaways from surrounding areas, including presumably the Australian mainland, and in recent centuries, fishing boats and pirates from Indonesia, loosely called "Malays" in the literature. To such visitors from outside, the Tiwi were consistently and implacably hostile. Their own traditions and what little written history there is of "Malay" penetration into the Arafura Sea both tell the same story. Outsiders who landed on the islands were massacred or vigorously resisted. Whether they were classified as *Malai-ui* ("Malays") or *Wona-rui*

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(Australian aborigines from the mainland) they were not Tiwi and hence not real people, or at least not human enough to share the islands with the chosen people who owned them.

Thus, the word "Tiwi" did not mean "people" in the sense of all human beings, but rather "we, the only people," or the chosen people who live on and own the islands, as distinct from any other alleged human beings who might show up from time to time on the beaches. This exclusion of outsiders from real "us-ness" and hence from real "human-ness" was continued when the Europeans began to arrive in the early nineteenth century, and certainly as late as 1930 the Tiwi continued to call and think of themselves as Tiwi, *the* people, and to use other words for all non-Tiwi, whether they were mainland aborigines, Malay fishermen, Japanese pearl-divers, French priests, or British officials, who penetrated into their exclusive little cosmos.

Their firm tradition that the twenty-five miles of ocean were adequate to isolate them from the mainland is confirmed by certain objective distributional evidence. Several characteristic features of mainland native technology were absent on Melville and Bathurst Islands, notably the spear thrower and the curved (or return) boomerang. To anthropologists, the idea of an Australian tribe lacking spear throwers and curved boomerangs is almost a contradiction in terms, and the only feasible explanation is isolation and hence failure of these mainland traits to diffuse to the islands.[1]

That no culture stands absolutely still in its technology no matter how isolated it may be is suggested by the fact that the Tiwi, while lacking the spear thrower and curved boomerang of the mainland, elaborated their wooden spears to a complexity of design and a degree of decoration unknown on the mainland, and also developed a much greater assortment of straight throwing sticks, made of hardwood, than any mainland tribe. Moreover, their carved and elaborately painted grave posts are unique among Australian tribes, and point up both the Tiwi isolation from the mainland and the favorable food situation which permitted the leisure time necessary to manufacture the elaborate posts as well as the elaborate ceremonial spears. In the nontechnological aspects of their culture we find in many respects the same absence of mainland traits and the same elaboration of traits that were distinctively or even uniquely Tiwi. Male initiation ceremonies on the mainland focus upon circumcision or subincision or both; neither custom was practiced by the Tiwi, who instead included in their initiation ritual the forcible plucking out of the pubic hair of the novice. The degree of plural marriages achieved under their marriage rules was far greater than anything reported for the mainland; the absolute prohibition of any female, regardless of age, being without a husband was unknown elsewhere in Australia; certain features of the kinship system fail to conform to any of the mainland norms, and so on. Wherever we look in their culture we get the strong impression of an Aus-

[1] A toy spear thrower, played with by children, was in use, but this may be the result of post-white contact. Its native name—*pani*—seems most un-Tiwi, and a likely guess is that it was introduced by Cooper's mainlanders, being accepted as a toy for children but scorned as childish by the adult men.

3: Hart E-5 (1928-1929) 1930 OI20 Tiwi OI20

they speak one language and they regard a certain defined area of land as belonging to them.

The Australian tribe is a collection of persons who speak a common language, or what they themselves regard as such, practise the same customs, and normally have a name by which they distinguish themselves and their language. The inhabitants of Melville and Bathurst Islands are therefore to be regarded as a single tribe, but it is difficult to find a true tribal name. The Uwaidja of Port Essington call the Melville Islanders, *Wuŋuk*, as Spencer notes, but the Melville Islanders scarcely regard it as necessary to call themselves anything. The local group of which a man is conscious of being a member is the horde, and until the advent of the white man, the Melville Islander was not aware that any other people existed except themselves. It was impossible and also quite unnecessary for them to visit the mainland in their bark canoes more especially as the coast around Cape Don and Cape Hotham, dimly seen on clear days, was regarded as the abode of departed souls, *Tibambinumi*, the home of the dead. It was apparently just as impossible or unnecessary, or perhaps danger was the chief deterrent, for the Uwaidja or the Larakia to visit Melville Island.

The result was that the people, with no contact with people not of their own tribe, did not really need a tribal name, and very seldom used the word *Tiwi*, which is the only one that can be regarded as the name of the tribe.

Tiwi is a word that is known and but seldom used. Some of the younger men were in fact surprised and interested when they heard the old men using it in response to my enquiries. There is no question of secrecy or tabu about it. In common everyday use are the words *tini*, meaning a man of one of the Melville or Bathurst Island hordes, *i.e.*, a male member of the Tiwi, and *tiŋa* meaning a female member of the tribe. *Tiwi* is the plural form of *tini* and *tiŋa*. It is often said by informants that *tini* means a man, and *tiŋa* a woman, irrespective of colour or race, but in point of fact these words are only used as applying to members of the *Tiwi*, and some other word would be used in referring to a white man, or a Larakia or Uwaidja.

Objection may be made to the adoption as the tribal name of these people of a word that theoretically at any rate seems simply "men" in the ordinary language. But in point of fact the word is never used except